

Chapter 1: Looking Up

The last thing Richard Hilzoy thought before the bullet entered his brain was, *Things are really looking up.*

He was on his way to the Silicon Valley offices of his lawyer, Alex Treven, who had arranged a meeting with Kleiner Perkins, the Midases of venture capital who could increase a company's value a hundredfold just by offering to invest. And now Kleiner was considering writing a check to *him*, Richard Hilzoy, genius, inventor of Obsidian, the world's most advanced encryption algorithm, destined to render all other network security software obsolete. Alex had already applied for the patent, and if things worked out with the VCs, Hilzoy would be able to rent office space, buy equipment, hire staff... everything he needed to finish commercializing the product and bring it on line. In a few years he would take the company public, and his shares would be worth a fortune. Or he'd stay private, and become to security software what Dolby was to sound, raking in billions in licensing revenues. Or Google would buy him, they were into everything these days. The main thing was, he was going to be rich.

And he deserved it. Working for chump change in an Oracle research laboratory, drinking Red Bull after Red Bull late at night and shivering in the deserted company parking lot for tobacco breaks, enduring the taunts and laughter he knew went on behind his back. Last year his wife had divorced him, and boy was the bitch ever going to be sorry now. If she'd had any brains she'd have waited until he was rolling in money and then tried to shake him down. But she'd never believed in him, and neither had anyone else. Except Alex.

He walked down the cracked exterior steps of his San Jose apartment building, squinting against the brilliant morning sun. He could hear the roar of rush hour traffic on Interstate 280 half a block away—the *whoosh, whoosh* of individual cars, trucks grinding gears as they pulled on from the entrance ramp at South Tenth Street, the occasional angry honk—and for once, having to live like this, right on top of the freeway, didn't bother him. Even the cheap bicycles and rusting barbecues and stained plastic garbage containers crammed together against the side of the adjacent building didn't bother him, nor did the reek the autumn breeze carried from the overflowing parking lot Dumpster.

Because Alex was going to get him out of this sewer hole. Oracle was a client of Alex's firm, and Hilzoy was Alex's contact on patents there. Hilzoy hadn't been overly impressed initially. He'd taken one look at Alex's blond hair and green eyes and figured him for just another pretty boy—rich parents, the right schools, the usual. But he had recognized soon enough that Alex knew his shit. Turned out he wasn't just a lawyer, but had degrees from Stanford, too—undergraduate in electrical engineering, same as Hilzoy, and a Ph.D. in computer science. He knew at least as much programming as Hilzoy, maybe more. So when Hilzoy had finally worked up the nerve to pull him aside and ask about

patenting Obsidian, Alex had gotten it right away. Not only had he deferred his fees, he'd introduced Hilzoy to a group of angel investors who had put in enough money for Hilzoy to quit his day job and buy the equipment he needed. And now he was poised to take money from the biggest swinging dicks of all. All in the space of a single year. Unbelievable.

Of course, there were aspects to Obsidian that the VCs might not like if they knew about them. They might even have found them scary. But they wouldn't know, because there was no reason to tell them. Obsidian could protect networks, and there wasn't a Fortune 500 company out there that wouldn't pay out the wazoo for that. That's what VCs understood. The rest... well, that would all just be his little secret, a kind of insurance policy to fall back on if Obsidian's intended uses weren't enough to command the proper sums.

He looked at his watch. He was nervous about the meeting. But there was time enough for a cigarette; that would calm him down. He stopped at the bottom of the stairs and fired one up. He took a deep drag, then put the pack and the lighter back in his pocket. There was a white van parked next to his car, an '88 Buick Regency he'd bought after selling his Audi during the divorce. *Humane Pest Control*, the van said. He'd noticed it here, what, three times in the last week? Four? He'd seen a rat once, under the Dumpster. And there were roaches. Somebody must have made a stink with building management and now the idiots were trying to show they were doing something about it. Whatever. Pretty soon that would all be someone else's problem.

There were some scares along the way, existing inventions Alex was concerned might prevent them from getting a patent. And something about a possible secrecy order from the government, which could slow things down. But so far Alex had always found a way around the problems. The patent hadn't been issued yet, but the application itself was bankable.

Hilzoy had been worried at first about describing the source code in the patent application because anyone who got hold of it would know the recipe for Obsidian, but Alex had assured him the Patent and Trademark Office maintained all applications in strict confidence for eighteen months, at which point they'd have a good idea about whether a patent would be forthcoming. And once the patent was issued, it wouldn't matter whether people knew the recipe or not—they couldn't use it without paying him the big bucks. And if they tried to, Alex would sue them into the ground. That's right, people, you want to play, you got to pay.

He paused in front of the Buick and got out his keys. What a piece of crap. It had over a hundred thousand miles on it and every one of them showed. It was the kind of car you could piss all over and no one would even notice. A Mercedes, he thought, not for the first time. Or maybe a BMW. Black, a convertible. He'd have it detailed four times a year so it would always look new.

The pest control guy got out of the van. He was wearing a baseball cap, coveralls, and gloves. He nodded to Hilzoy through a pair of shades and moved past him. Hilzoy nodded back, glad he didn't have to kill rats for a living.

He took a drag on the cigarette, then tossed it away, enjoying the feeling of wasting it. He blew the smoke up at the sky and unlocked the car door. Yeah, baby, he thought. Oh yeah. Things are really looking up.